

One last day at the lab by OrangeLovePerson

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Summary:

Before it gets all shut down, El, Hopper, Mike, Joyce and Dr. Owens visit Hawkins' lab one more time, in order to adress some questions. (Hurt/comfort, some angst and some fluff)

One last day at the lab

"We don't have to do this today if you don't feel like it. But at one point, we definitely should...", Dr. Owens explained, frowning.

El shook her head, steadying herself inwardly.

"No, it's okay.", she murmured, ever so quietly. Mike stared at her in wonder and worry, and Mrs. Byers reached an arm over El's shoulder, pressing her closer to her own body. Chief Hopper took a long drag from his cigarette, the smoke creating small curls of grey in the frosty winter air, as his eyebrows creased.

The group slowly approached the building; the big, clinical hell hole that it was. Not much longer would it stand here, this hell hole... Only a couple more days perhaps. But that was exactly the reason why they had to act, had to go in there today and not next week or next month or any other time when Eleven would be ready to deal with all of it... The truth was, she might never feel ready.

Last time she was here, she'd had an actual mission to accomplish... An actual plan to focus on. Today... today, she wasn't so certain. Dr. Owens had said he needed to get some of his equipment out of there, in case it was taken away to other government-run labs all over the country, and, more importantly, he still had some tests to take with said equipment as long as it was still installed so perfectly. "Even if I get all my instruments and screens back", he'd said, "I'm not sure how long it will take to rearrange it again like that. It might be months until I get everything working again so precisely!", Owens had complained. "That's why it would really mean a lot to me if you could help me, Eleven. You know, for Science's sake."

Usually, El would never have trusted Dr. Owens to begin with. How could she possibly? How was she supposed to trust someone who dressed like Papa and worked in the same lab as Papa had, and who was now asking her to help him in the same "It only makes sense"-sort of way that Papa had already used her entire life?

Science wasn't a word El used to like, either. "Scientists" is what she heard the bad people call themselves. All proudly and stubbornly.

Being a scientist was their excuse for everything bad they ever did, it seemed. It's okay to hurt others if you're a scientist. You don't even have to feel bad about it, not even a little bit.

El disagreed very much with that. She didn't think scientists were the sort of people anyone could trust at all.

But then she'd heard Dustin say that he maybe wanted to become a scientist, one day. And Dustin was one of the nicest people El had ever, ever met. She was really confused when she'd heard it.

And that teacher of Mike and the others? The one she'd met last year, shortly? The one who'd later helped them to fill the gigantic bath tub, speaking to them on the phone so late at night?

Mr. Clarke was a scientist, too, wasn't he?

So, maybe, not every scientist was mean and bad. Maybe, not even every scientist who dressed like Papa was mean and bad. And Mrs. Byers, and Hopper, and Will,- they'd all told El that Dr. Owens was nice, that she should trust him. She would try, for them... Not for Dr. Owens, though. He hadn't earned it entirely yet...

The door to the building was heavy and its handle was covered in huge locks and chains, but they had brought all sorts of keys and tools, and after a while, Dr. Owens and Hopper had it open. Mike was still so very close to her, El could feel his steady breathing somewhere behind her... It calmed her down and excited her, both at once. Joyce was holding her elbow, gently rubbing small circles on top of Eleven's jumper.

El could feel her heartbeat quicken as they entered the first hallway.

"So... Let's hope that they actually cleaned up in here.", she heard Dr. Owens mutter. Hopper shook his head.

"Doc, I told you. The first dead body we see, - Demodog or human,- and we're immediately out of here.", he snarled.

"Of course, of course. They must have removed all the evidence by now, anyway. The government is not that stupid..."

"Hmpf.", Joyce snorted, sceptically. El suppressed a giggle, despite the tension, suddenly meeting Mike's smiling gaze next to her. She blushed lightly.

When they entered the elevator, they saw the first strain of blood still lingering on one of the wood covered metal walls... It wouldn't be the last one. No, they saw several more red spots on the wall paper, as they entered the next corridor, and the one after that...

Eleven felt less and less secure, the deeper they went into the building.

This wasn't good. This feeling wasn't good at all, so confusing and ugly and scary. The artificial light was wrong, the air was wrong, the medical smell it carried was wrong. El had spend her entire life surrounded by different levels of that same, horrible smell, and yet she'd never quite grown familiar with it, never quite learned to ignore it. Maybe it was even harder to elide, now that she'd been to the outside world and to places with such different smells and colours, but El felt the overwhelming wish to be away from the lab once again, to leave it and never have to return again. But she'd said she'd help, and Mike and Mrs Byers had come with them, just to support her, and she couldn't disappoint them by giving up already.

She also couldn't keep her heart from pacing so quickly, however. So violently, fearfully quickly.

"You okay, El?", Mike asked her, eyeing her carefully. His fingers wrapped themselves around hers, gently, as she held his gaze and nodded.

"You sure? You look very pale...", he said, his voice raspy with worry.

"You really do, sweetie.", Joyce agreed, from somewhere to her left. "Maybe we should go and come back tomorrow."

Dr. Owens and Hopper had stopped in front of them, everyone quietly watching El. She shook her head violently. No, she definitely didn't want that. She didn't want to leave if it meant she had to come back again, another day! She didn't want to ever have to come back at all.

Hopper seemed to read that in her face, because he turned to Dr. Owens with a severe face. "I don't think this was a good idea, Doc. Maybe we should just go."

Dr. Owens sighed, before suddenly lowering his body on one knee in front of El and the others, his body heaving painfully from the weight he was now putting on his sore limbs. Owens hadn't fully recovered from all his injuries yet, just like El hadn't fully overcome her almost-constant tiredness yet.

"I... I know that it's difficult to be here... Eleven..", Owens said, obviously still feeling a little awkward when addressing her with such a weird name, "But if we do this together today, I promise I won't bother you again for a while, and you surely won't have to go into such a facility again any time soon."

Eleven blinked at him, taking in his elderly features and the sort-of-friendly creases around his nose and mouth... He actually didn't look a lot like Papa, despite the clothes. And he'd said promise. Her attention was also caught by something else, though.

"Fa- Facility?", she asked, not sure about what that meant, and Hopper caught her eyes over Owens shoulder.

"It means house, El. A facility is basically just a house.", he said.

"Or a bathroom.", Mike quipped in, "Sometimes it means bathroom."

El raised her eyebrows. A bathroom and a house were quite different, so why should there be a word that meant both?

"Or it could mean "opportunity".", Dr Owens added, apparently amused with this conversation. "Do you know what that means, Eleven? Opportunity?"

El wasn't entirely sure, so she shook her head. Hopper clicked his tongue and eyed Dr. Owens in annoyance. He probably thought the elderly man was just trying to distract El in some silly way, but El somehow felt like Owens really had something important to say to her.

"An opportunity is a chance, Eleven. And right now, we do have a

really good chance to achieve something. It's not often in science that you get the chance to really explore something peculiar, something truly never heard of before, but right now I do have such a chance. What you can do, Eleven", he shook his head, his features lit up by an amazed smile, "It's truly fascinating to me. So please, let me find something out about how it all works, will you? Can you please, please do this for me?"

He looked so friendly, she thought. Not at all like the scientists she knew from the lab. He wasn't demanding, no, he was pleading. And if she'd say no, he'd respect it, wouldn't he? She truly thought he would. That's why she just had to say yes, of course.

His smile widened when he saw her nod, and he carefully lifted himself up from his awkward position on the floor, groaning uncomfortably.

"Great!", he exclaimed, turning around the next corner, followed by the others, and soon enough the next big safety door stood in their way.

Owens used his security card, and it didn't take long for El to slowly become more and more aware of their surroundings.

"You've been here before, haven't you?", Hopper asked her, quietly. "Even before we came here to close the gate, I mean?"

El nodded, feeling her breathing quicken... It hadn't been like this last time. When they'd come here to close the gate, she hadn't been this scared, hadn't been this focused on the walls and rooms around her...

"Which part of this floor do you remember? Do you remember any of the doors here?", Hopper wanted to know, looking thoughtful.

El pointed at one of the doors to their left, and they waited for Owens to open it.

Inside, there was a table and a chair, nothing more. The walls were covered in the same white tiles that made most of the rest of this building look so sterile and lifeless, too... One of the walls had a large window frame, giving view to another, smaller room.

"Is this were they did their tests on you, Eleven?", Dr. Owens asked.

"Some of them.", she answered, softly.

"And that's where they watched you from?", he continued, pointing at the room behind the glass.

She nodded.

"What did they make you do?", Mike asked her, and when El looked at him, she saw an anger covering his features that she hadn't found there very often...

"Different. Sometimes they wanted me to break things. Or to bend things...", Eleven replied, thinking back to wooden planks, metal wires and tin cans.

Dr. Owens had left the tile covered room and hobbled to the next door, opening the smaller room with his key. They could now see him behind the window, looking around. "I've been in here a few times, but I never really knew for sure whether this was also where they did some of the experiments... I didn't want to focus on all that too much, I guess...", he contemplated, his voice a little muffled behind the glass. "They wanted a fresh new start, after Brenner. New people, new directions... Felt safer, not to ask too many questions.", he explained.

Then, he lifted a huge cage into the air, looking at Eleven, contemplatively.

"What exactly was this for?"

She sighed, soundlessly, closing her eyes for a second. She could feel the memories rise inside her tummy. And the shame. "Cats.", she mumbled.

"Cats?", Hopper asked, bewildered.

"Or monkeys. Sometimes monkeys. Mostly cats."

"What the hell for?!"

It was quiet for a few seconds.

"Sometimes... Sometimes they didn't just make me break things and bend things. Sometimes they wanted me to kill things."

Non of the others really looked like they knew what to say to that, so the silence remained for a couple more instants. If Mike's fingers hadn't wrapped around hers for just a second, right then, El would have felt entirely, awfully bad.

"Let's keep going.", Dr. Owens dimmed voice came through the glass, his gaze unreadable, and El wasn't quite sure what that meant or how to react.

She just nodded, and they left the room. Both of her hands felt a little empty again, now that Mike's touch was gone. He was walking directly behind her, so close that she could feel his eyes on the back of her head, but she'd liked his fingers in hers better.

A few steps further down the corridor, El saw her old bedroom, and Hopper seemed to recognize it, too.

"That's where you slept, right?", he asked, his voice gentle. "Where they put you whenever they weren't ... taking tests?"

His eyes had turned quite hard towards the end of that sentence, and El nodded once again.

Joyce and Mike seemed curious, as well as a little nauseous. When Owens pushed the door open, they all stepped inside, looking around in something like horror.

El had forgotten just how tiny her bedroom had been, or maybe she'd never really noticed it, before. There weren't that many people in it, when she was younger. It had only ever been her in this room, or sometimes Papa or one of the scientists, bringing her food or instructions for their next plan.

Her room hadn't looked so empty and scary, before... She used to almost feel home in here, sometimes. But then she'd learned what it really meant to feel home, and now she never wanted to think about the lab any longer, at all.

"It's so..." - , Joyce muttered, apparently not sure what she wanted to say, but her features were twitching in something like... grief? Disgust, maybe?

"Horrible...", Mike finished for her, his voice barely above a whisper. He turned towards El with a weirdly determined look in his eyes, and she would have given up Eggos for a whole week to know what he was thinking, right now.

"Certainly not the best environment for a child.", Dr. Owens agreed.

El also thought that it wasn't a good place to live in, this colourless, lifeless room. But then again, she'd seen worse. She'd lived in a forest last winter. She'd almost been starving to death, constantly in fear of being discovered.

And the cold.

The cold had almost been unbearable, so unbearable that a part of her was sure she wouldn't survive much longer.

It hadn't been cold in her bedroom here. There was always the same temperature everywhere. Well, not everywhere, perhaps... Not in the tube with the water, the bath. That room, and its content, had always been rather warm. The water had to be sort of warm, after all. And then there were the dark rooms... The cold, petty, dark rooms. El didn't want to think of that, right now...

Hopper snorted, humourlessly. "You can count on that, Doc. I bet any kids-shrink would faint, looking at this room."

He turned to El. "Did you ever try to escape, El? Before you did, I mean?"

She shook her head. "It wouldn't have worked."

That wasn't entirely true, perhaps... She'd thought about running away quite often, actually, and sometimes there had been open doors and distracted adults and opportunities. (She liked that word, she was glad Dr. Owens had explained it to her.)

But then there was fear. Fear of losing any respect or appreciation

Papa had left for her. Fear of failing, fear of what they would do to punish her if she didn't succeed. And fear of the unknown. She knew that life wasn't like this everywhere, she'd heard the scientists talking to their colleagues and knew that their lives didn't revolve around these white tiled halls in the way that hers did. Things had to be better, elsewhere...

But she didn't know anything precise about that, and she didn't know what she'd do if she ever made it out. She was so confused by so many things and so very, very alone.

But one day, something horrible and scary had happened, and suddenly the fear of that thing – the Demagorgon, the noise, everyone's panic, - had overpowered any other fears in her mind, and she'd run and crawled and done anything she could in order to get away from her former home.

"Of course it would have!", Mike suddenly chimed in, his eyes very bright. Was he angry at her? "El, you are so strong, of course it could have worked!"

She didn't know how to explain it to him... How to say that she'd needed the panic, the sense of guilt, to go through with it... That she hadn't been as strong as she was now, hadn't cared enough about anything to really notice her own power.

"I didn't know how.", she quietly admitted, because it was true. "I didn't know what for.", she added, even quieter, because that was also true.

El's muttering was so tinged with self-reproach, that Joyce looked close to tears all of the sudden.

"Oh, dear!", she said, engulfing the young girl in a tight hug that almost made El sob in some weird form of relief. But she didn't want to cry or to sob right now, so she held it in, fluttering her eyes shut against Joyce' shoulder. When she let her go, though, it took only a moment for Mike to take over.

His eyes were soft and sad and not angry at all, or at least not at El. His arms were warm and his smell was Mike.

And El really didn't want to cry any more, then.

She'd thought they'd be angry or disgusted or scared upon hearing what she'd done in the window room already. Not all cats were creepy, after all. Some were creepy. But some were nice and fluffy and innocent, and El had killed or hurt some of them, anyway. And yet, here they were, her almost-Dad and her friend's wonderful mum and her favourite boy in the world, and they all weren't judging her, it seemed... It was nice that they didn't hate her for this.

So very nice.

Mike's body was still warming her when she sniffed out a laugh, gently leaning back and stepping out of his embrace. He returned her smile immediately, looking relieved that she felt better. And maybe relieved that he'd managed to make her feel better, too. But he really should have known by now that that was always the case.

"And now?", Dr. Owens asked, holding a different type of flashlight than before in front of El's face. She tried hard not to blink, but this one was the brightest one yet.

"Still can't see.", she told him, honestly.

"What about this one?", he wanted to know, swopping the tiny lamp yet again, "If I hold this one here up, can you then read what's written on the wall, Eleven?"

She tried hard, and after a couple seconds El could actually make something out, despite sitting directly in the pale cone of light.

"H - A - F - Q - L - Z - X - P -..."

She frowned. "That doesn't make sense.", she then said, matter-of-factly.

Mike snorted, which quickly turned into a fond smile. Hopper raised an eyebrow at the boy.

"It's not supposed to make sense, Eleven.", Dr. Owens explained, patiently. "It's not an actual word, it's just a test to see how well your vision works."

He clicked the tiny button on the burning flashlight, effectively turning it off and giving El occasion to blink really quickly, slowly being able to focus on the entire room again.

"And, as it turns out," Dr. Owens went on, reajusting the glasses on his forehead, "As it turns out, your vision works perfectly well. Perfectly normal for a kid your age." He almost sounded disappointed, turning to Joyce and the chief.

"So, we've got a normal heart rate, a normal blood pressure, ...- no obvious physical sign of anything unusual, whatsoever." He shook his head. "It's unbelievable."

"What did you expect, Doc?", Hopper commented, shrugging. "A third arm? Perfect night vision?"

"Possibly, yes.", Dr. Owens agreed, to everyone's surprise. "Or any other form of physical evidence, apart from the nose bleeding – that occurs while she's using her powers. No, I'm looking for a sort of permanent unnaturalness, if you know what I mean."

Joyce scoffed, crossing her arms. "You're surely joking."

Owens looked her in the eye.

"The chief mentioned that you were part of his investigation in '83, Mrs Byers, - the one regarding your son Will. Therefore I assume you know about her... well, her origin?"

He cleared his throat, lowering his gaze as El eyed him suspiciously.

"You mean, how Eleven got her powers?", Joyce replied, carefully chancing a glance at the two kids in the room. "Yes, I heard the backstory."

"Then I assume you can also realise just how much of a highly measurable thing this has to be.", he told her, looking very much in his element. "There has to exist an actual, physical explanation for what we're experiencing with her. It's not some sort of voodoo-trick that makes this girl so scientifically interesting, Mrs Byers! These "powers", as you call them, are the fascinating result of specific chemical and genetic circumstances. At least that's how I see it."

"Hang on.", Mike quipped in, who's attention seemed to be on another topic of the conversation, his expression serious. He stepped a little closer to El, who still sat on the bench. She was watching the others with wide eyes.

"You actually know where El got her powers from? You've known all along?"

He looked from Hopper to Joyce, half-surprised, half-angry. "Did you tell her? El, did they tell you?"

Before she could reply, Hopper had growled loudly.

"I swear to you, Wheeler, if you're trying to cause a drama on a day like this then..-!"

"No, I think the boy might be right, Chief.", Dr. Owens considered, ignoring Hopper's annoyed attitude. "If we're trying to gain as many clues about this as possible, - which is beneficial for all of us, - then we really shouldn't keep this sort of knowledge from Eleven."

Owens half-sat on his desk, his knuckles creating tiny sounds against the wood.

"There's no medical explanation for her situation, so far. Openly talking to her might be the best source of information we have."

Mike looked pretty smug, leaning back against the wall. Joyce was biting her lip.

It was silent for yet another moment. Hopper sighed.

"Okay, someone go ahead, then.", he murmured, eyeing El worriedly.

"Can... Can I do the talking?", Joyce asked, into the room, unsure. The Doctor and Hopper both seemed fine with this, and El nodded as well. She twitched a bit, on her bench.

And yes, El was curious to find out some more, but the way the adults in the room were acting was also scary to her. She'd already learned a lot about her Mama from her aunt Becky, after all. And that had seemed like enough terrible stuff to find out about your family,

all at once.

El knew now that the bad men had taken her Mama, and that she'd been hurt by them when she'd later come back to rescue Eleven. Mama had fought for El, and now she couldn't even really walk any longer because of it. She couldn't even eat without help! Or brush her hair. Mama has beautiful hair.

El also understood that the bad men and Papa had known about what El could do, even before El was born.

How could they have known that? El didn't know a lot about babies, but she knew enough to find this very strange. How had Papa known that El was different when she hadn't even been a real El yet?

Mike moved closer, perhaps in case she needed him there, or maybe just on instinct.

"El.", Will's Mum said, her pretty, motherly face furrowed in concern as she took a seat in front of her, "El, when you visited your Mum, a couple weeks ago, what did you find out?"

Eleven thought about this for a moment. The first thing that came to mind was Kali – Kali was, who her mother had tried to remind her of, after all. Kali was Mama's hope of a family for El.

But that was the tricky part. Because, - and she didn't even entirely know why, - El hadn't told anyone about her adventure in Chicago yet. Not a single person, not even Mike.

There'd just been so much other stuff to talk about so far that El had happily ignored a couple opportunities to open up, and instead had kept quiet about this one thing. Next to everyone's time in school; the countless things Mike wanted to explain to her or show her, now that she was back; next to visiting Will and becoming friends with Max and admiring Dustin's new teeth while Lucas rolled his eyes, - next to all of that, talking about her long lost, older sister hadn't seemed so important, somehow.

It wasn't lying, right? Not telling things right away was different than not saying the truth, wasn't it?

El really hoped it was. Because friends don't lie.

But, she also didn't want to talk about Kali. El wasn't sure she could handle those feelings yet: The shame at having disappointed her sister, but also the sadness, because Kali wasn't quite like she'd seemed at first.

The realisation that Kali would probably never be able to find her, and that El would maybe never see her again.

The fear of what Kali had made El see, the fear of Papa. He was dead. He had to be dead. But now there was this fear in El's head again, put there by Kali, and on purpose. El was so angry when she thought about that, she almost liked that her leaving must have hurt Kali.

No. No, not that.

El didn't want to hurt. She just didn't want to feel scared. She didn't want to live an adventurous life like Kali and her friends if it meant exactly these two things: Hurting and being scared, all for some feeling of happy revenge that hadn't quite reached El's heart yet.

Also, Hopper would be so angry if he found out just how much trouble El had really gotten herself into, that week...

"El?", Mrs Byers repeated, smiling kindly. El blinked rather quickly and returned the questioning gaze. "Do you still remember, El? Do you know what your aunt told you?"

El swallowed. She nodded.

"Becky didn't believe in me."

"She thought you were some sort of myth, didn't she?", Joyce chanced a glance at Hopper. "Yes, that's what she told us when we met her."

"Myth?" El repeated, frowning.

"That's, like, a legend, El.", Mike quipped in, and she turned her head to look up at him. "Like a story, something that's probably not real."

"What else do you know, sweetie?", Joyce kept going, focused on El.

"What did Becky say?"

El lowered her gaze to the floor.

"Papa stole me. When I was born. Mama knew, but no one believed her."

"Dr. Brenner, you mean? He kidnapped you from the hospital?"

"Figures.", Hopper commented, not looking surprised. Mrs. Byers also seemed like she'd expected something like this.

"When Mama tried to get me back, they hurt her.", El continued.
"They made her head hurt. She can't think like before anymore."

Joyce reached for El's hand, soothingly holding it in hers. She looked so kind right then, El almost wished that she could be El's Mum, too.

But that was such a mean thought to have, when her own Mama had been so brave and good, as well. El wondered what it would have been like, if she'd grown up the normal way, alongside Mike and the others. Would her Mama and Joyce have become friends? El hoped they would have. Mama deserved friends, too. Everyone did.

"Do you know why?", Mrs. Byers asked. "Do you know why your Mama, and Dr. Brenner, knew about your powers all along?"

El shook her head, starting to feel nervous again.

"They were doing experiments here, El. People were doing a lot of very weird... tests. They put people in tanks, like your bathtub, remember?"

El nodded, furrowing her brows. Other people went into the bath, too?

"Only, they weren't....", Joyce was meeting Hoppers gaze again, "They weren't sober, like you were when you went into the tank. They'd been given drugs, that means 'medecine'. But not just good medecine, also dangerous stuff, erm,.."

She seemed to be struggling with the explanation, sighing.

"Your Mum got paid by Dr. Brenner, El...", Joyce kept going. "She wanted to help science, I think, and didn't know that it might be dangerous or that she shouldn't trust these people. They gave her a lot of drugs, - your aunt Becky told us, - and then she and all the other people who were part of the test were supposed to lay in the tanks and... Well, I think they were supposed to become...just like you, Eleven."

El's eyes went wide. "Like me?", she mumbled, quietly.

Joyce nodded, pressing the young girl's hand a little tighter. "Yes. Like you, Eleven. They wanted to make people very powerful, but it didn't work, at first... And then they found out that your Mum was pregnant."

"Pregnant means that there's a baby in someone's body.", Hopper murmured, from the side. He looked uncomfortable, explaining this right now. El raised an eyebrow at him, nonchalantly.

"I know.", she told him.

She was reading a lot, after all, even if she liked watching TV a little better. El found it important to learn at least most words. Especially now that she had her friends back.

"Oh.", Hopper replied, perhaps a little confused and not sure what to think of that.

"Anyway, your Mama was pregnant, El. She didn't know it, and your aunt Becky said that she'd never have done anything to put you in danger. She wouldn't have stayed in the project if she'd have known you were also a part of it."

El felt warm inside, the way that sounded. Her Mama was a real hero. A good, good person. El was proud of that.

"But she didn't know?", she asked, tentatively. Joyce shook her head.

"So that's why you have those abilities, El. You can do things with your mind because of some really weird things the people in this lab did. And when they found out what happened, they wanted to keep you all for themselves."

Joyce leaned over, hugging El for a moment.

"But they didn't have a right to do that. That wasn't okay. It's important that you understand that people have no right to be that way to you ever again, yes, El?"

El nodded when she leaned back from Will's Mum. Of course she knew that. No one was allowed to hurt her again, and no one would hurt her friends if El could prevent it.

"So, now that you know everything, Eleven.", Dr. Owens said, clearing his throat, "Is it possible that you can tell us anything we didn't know yet? Did you ever feel like your powers worked better in a certain environment, for example? When it's dark outside, or very bright somewhere? Or when it's colder or warmer than usual?"

El thought about it for a moment. What a weird idea. Except for the bath, of course.

"The bath works.", she answered, truthfully.

Dr. Owens didn't seem excited about this. "Yes, so I heard... Oh, what about certain substances? Any medication? Alcohol?"

Hopper rolled his eyes at the Doc. "What do you expect, Owens? You think I let her drink? I'm a cop, remember?"

Owens ignored this, sighing. "Well, I guess if I want to find out more, I'll just have to have a closer look at the x-ray photographs later. There's got to be some more on this, I can feel it..."

"Well, all due respect for your scientific interest, Doc, but you know the price. If..."

"If any information about her existence leaks, I'll be a dead man, I get it. I'm not trying to cause problems, Hopper. You should know that by now."

"Yeah, yeah.", Hopper waved aside, looking calmer again. "I think this was enough for today. You've done your fancy tests, you've talked to her, can we go now?"

Joyce nodded, relieved. "Yes, please. Let's get out of here."

Her hands were shaking, El noticed. She wondered if Joyce thought about her own past with the building, too: Not just all the horrors regarding Will, but also Bob's death, somewhere in here. Thinking like that made El's skin tingle. Not in the sweet way, like it did when Mike came closer. In the scary way, like it did when scary people came closer.

On their way out, El didn't even glance at the door. She knew it was there. She could see it lurking there, down the hall, from the corner of her eye... The small, dark room. It was the worst place on earth, maybe. Perhaps even worse than the upside down. In the upside down, there was space. It was terrible, but at least there was room for panic, for flight. The small, dark rooms weren't filled with anything but shame, and with a fear that didn't feed from physical danger, but that fed from a feeling of bottomless, hopeless rejection. Will they ever open the door again?, El used to think. Will they return, or did they decide to leave me here for good? Not in these exact words, of course. People didn't care enough about her to make her learn many words, in here. They barely ever talked to her.

"El?", she heard Mike ask, and his palm was holding her elbow, gently. "El, what's up?"

She'd tell him, one day, she swore. She'd tell him everything.

But for now, she just put a hand on top of his, keeping his comforting touch in place, and gave him a quick glance, her wide, brown eyes meeting his darker ones. And he understood what she meant. She knew he did, somehow.

Later that day, it was raining till the sky turned midnight blue. It was winter, so the air in front of the cabin was like one giant fridge, but one without Eggos and orange juice.

Hopper was working, his forehead covered with all the tiny wrinkles grown-ups got when thinking too hard.

Mike was still there, but soon Nancy would come pick him up. It was unusually quiet between the two of them, mostly because it had been

such a tough day and because they just needed to feel close right now, without any words being necessary. But also a little bit because it had been a tough day for Hopper, too, and the way he now sunk his teeth into work seemed to have made Mike think that the chief could use a little quiet, just for now. He often looked annoyed at how chatty Mike could get, after all. El loved how much Mike always had to say to her, but now the silence was good, too.

He and El sat on the couch, playing Tic-Tac-Toe on one of El's yellow notebooks, when he suddenly wrote a tiny note on the side of the paper.

"Are you okay?", the note said. El met Mike's gaze, studying her own.

She nodded, giving him a tiny smile. The corners of his eyes were crinkling a little.

He was so real, Mike. El wondered if people like Mike were even really able to really lie, or to be selfish. And then she noticed how silly it was to think of "people like Mike". There were no people like Mike. There was just Mike. He was the most wonderful person.

El thought of Kali, and of the other parts about the last year she hadn't told him, yet, and it seemed wrong. Keeping things from Mike wasn't right. So...

"I want to tell you something.", she carefully wrote. She saw his eyes eagerly follow her letters, confused.

"But I can not tell you yet."

His eyes were on her face again, and she tried to somehow convey in a single stare exactly what she meant. With Mike, this worked sometimes.

He really must have seen the worry in her eyes, and the fear of having said the wrong thing. His features softened as he took the pen from her.

"You can tell me everything, El. But I'm always here for you."

He looked contemplative, blushing a little before he continued. "We

have all the time in the world, now."

Eleven gave him a real smile then, - a glittery eyed, cheek-flushing smile. She liked the way he smiled back, and she also liked to have all the time in the world to tell him all she needed to tell him.

But mostly, El liked the 'we' when Mike wrote it on her yellow note pad, his left thumb rubbing tic-tac-toe-patterns onto her wrist.

The End.